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ABSTRACT

Recognizing that writing across the curriculum supports the idea that writing is an integral part of the total learning process, this paper describes the philosophy of the writing program at Blue Ridge Technical College (North Carolina). It begins with some comments and thoughts on what makes writing worthwhile and how to judge good writing. Criteria include: does it make a point? Is the purpose supported? Does everything relate to the main point? Is everything tied together? Does it use good sentence skills? The assignments described include (1) writing about something students have already learned, (2) writing about something students are going to learn, (3) writing about something students are in the process of learning, (4) summary writing, (5) definition writing, (6) log/journal writing, and (7) writing for vocational reasons. The paper concludes with some "do's" and "don'ts" associated with writing across the curriculum programs. (HOD)

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BLUE RIDGE TECHNICAL COLLEGE

WRITING PROJECT

1986

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NOTE:

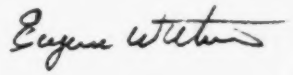
These writings grew out of my involvement with Project All Write during the summer of 1985 at Western Carolina University. Project All Write, like many other writing projects, evolved from the National Writing Conference which began in 1974, then known as the Bay Area Writing Conference.

The WAC(Writing Across the Curriculum) movement, on which these pages are premised, is not a revolutionary concept. It believes simply that writing is a way to learning. We might look at it as a reaffirmation of a long-held belief, but one which was laid aside.

We are fortunate at Blue Ridge Technical College to have students who, for the most part, are quite literate. Some of our allies in other community and technical colleges have it much worse. Nevertheless, we need to constantly insist on good writing skills; we must be a part of the solution.

***A special thanks to Bea Hansen for typing and to Peake Dana, Betty Endres and Caren Kessler for helping in the workshops.

Eugene Wittman



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WRITING PROJECT FOR BLUE RIDGE TECHNICAL COLLEGE

INTRODUCTION:

Writing across the curriculum supports the idea that writing is an integral part of the total learning process. Writing is a way of learning, thinking and problem solving. This notion has been sometimes forgotten in the past, and because we practice these skills less, they have become rusty.

For these reasons and more, we hope that writing becomes a more important aspect of your course here at Blue Ridge Technical College. In the next few pages, we will give you some ideas on how you can get writing back in your curriculum. We will offer some comments and thoughts on what makes writing worthwhile, how we might better judge good writing, and how we might improve our own writing. Keep in mind that writing is more than English class; it is also something we use more often than just for test-taking.

Writing, as it is referred to here, is not only grammar, spelling and punctuation. Certainly these points are necessary in the end product, but think of writing as a five step process and not simply a product. It is composing; it is sustained, organized thought on paper. Now let's take a look at how we might judge good writing.

There is a certain mystery to writing, no question about it! But to be able to respond intelligently, convincingly, and effectively to a particular situation, you only need to examine a few basic concepts for average competency.

WHAT SHOULD WE LOOK FOR IN GOOD WRITING?

A. DOES IT MAKE A POINT?

If good writing does anything, it must do this! The concept of "PURPOSE" is central to all good writing. It must make a point. As you check a piece of writing for its point, observe the following guidelines:

Points to Remember!

- Is there just one point?
- Is there an opening statement?
- Is the point too broad?
- Is the point too narrow?

DISCUSSION:

B. IS THE WRITING SUPPORTED?

If writing is to have any worth, it must have evidence to support it. In other words, the point that is being made must be supported by proofs and evidence. Too often, statements are made, but lack supports and show signs of very poor research or observation. Readers are not impressed with statements, or points eloquently made, but not backed up. Look for these attributes in supported writing:

Points to Remember!

- Is there specific evidence?
- Is there enough evidence in the supports?

DISCUSSION:

C. DOES EVERYTHING RELATE TO THE MAIN POINT?

English teachers refer to this as "unity." Good writing must contain support sentences which speak to the main point. Faulty sentences should be dropped since they have nothing to do with the main message. But how often do we see writing which is put together with the "shotgun method". As you study a piece of writing for effective unity, check the following:

Points to Remember!

- Do all supports relate to the main point?
- Do all details relate to the main point?

D. IS EVERYTHING TIED TOGETHER?..COHESIVE?

Good writing is organized and tied together. The magical quality that suggests a logic, or a clear plan, provides links and a smooth flow between sentences.

Points to Remember!

- Is there a clear plan?
- Is there a clear pattern?
- Is everything tied together with sufficient links, transitions and connectors?

E. DOES IT HAVE GOOD SENTENCE SKILLS?

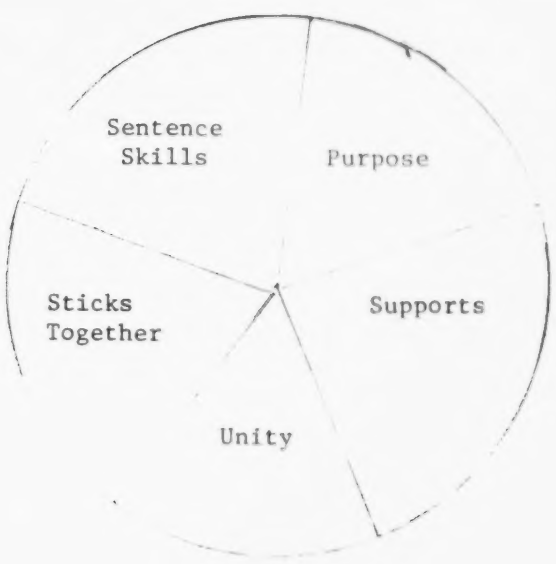
Usually when we think about good writing, the first thing that comes to mind is something such as grammar, spelling or punctuation. These are the items we refer to as "sentence skills." Occasionally, sentence skills, spelling etc. block out the other aspects of writing which were mentioned earlier. Experience, however tells us that for a piece of writing to merit serious consideration, sentence skills must be relatively error-free.

Points to Remember!

- Is the writing free of spelling errors?
- Are there any punctuation mistakes?
- Are all sentences complete?
- Is there good sentence variety?

CONCLUSION

Looking back on what's been said up to this point, we might think of effective written communication then as an entity, containing five equal pieces, a pentagonal figure, sort of like the wedgies that you find in the game of TRIVIAL PURSUIT. In this popular game, as in good writing, if a "wedgie" is missing, there is no winner. Each wedgie, (1) purpose, (2) supports, (3) unity, (4) sticking together, (5) sentence skills is an essential component of the total product. We need to pursue good writing with each of these in mind.



II. ASSIGNMENTS TO GET STUDENTS WRITING

One useful technique to get students involved in writing is the ungraded (LEARNING-LOG). A learning log is a running account of what learning has taken place. Students could be asked to purchase a spiral notebook in which they put their log entries. Here are three writing strategies which might be included in the student's learning log.

A. On a fairly regular basis, have students write about something they've already learned.

1) Write a short summary of the process you've studied this past week.

2) Write a paragraph or so on what you've learned about Ohm's Law.

3) This writing is very useful for reinforcing skills and checking on the learning which has already taken place. It forces students to recall what they have already learned.

4) As a learning log entry, students are asked to formulate, organize and express what you as the instructor consider to be important to your curriculum.

B. Another useful technique for learning log entries is an inductive, discovery approach to learning. Now the students are instructed to write about something new they are about to learn. This strategy gets students thinking about the subject at hand and sensitizes them to the topic. Instructors can determine from these log entries how much is already known and understood about the topic. After students have shared their responses in small groups. (three to four in a group) this same information could be shared with the entire class.

1) This approach would work best with subjects which are somewhat universal or broad. If I were to ask students to write everything they know about "photosynthesis" I might get very puzzled looks and no written response. If, on the other hand, I pick a broader topic such as "What factors contribute to plant growth?" the results might be better. If students have already had some formal or informal training is a particular area, the questions could certainly be more specific.
2) In a business management class: What do you know about "theory Y" management practices? Or students could be asked to list several questions they have regarding "Theory Z" management sytle.
3) Similar probes could be used in Tennis, History, Electronics, Nursing, Math, Auto-Body, Welding or any other class producing valuable insights into information students already have, or questions and problems that need to be resolved.
4) As these questions surface and as the answers to these questions appear, much of the learning is already beginning to take place. This approach is also student oriented rather than teacher centered and chances are, your students are going to develop a keener appreciation of this discovery.
5) So as you present new material, new principles, concepts, discover what students might already know about the subject through log entries. If you find, as one might expect, that they know very little, nothing has been lost since provocative questions have been raised. These entries can be done as in-class or homework and as with all log entries are usually ungraded but should be periodically checked.

C. A final strategy to ensure good writing is to ask students to write about something they are presently learning. This calls for a check of homework readings, or in-class studies. These assignments are another form of reinforcement and are also student centered.

1) Write a paragraph in which you highlight the main points of last night's reading assignment.

2) Explain your understanding of the process described in class yesterday...

- using a jig saw
- fixing a leaky faucet
- using a debit sheet
- plant propagation through layering
- building a diet around the major food groups
- fixing the dish "quiche lorraine"

3) In classes where outside work is kept to a minimum, ask students to write about the previous day's activity, lecture, discussion.

- Summarize in a short paragraph what we went over in class yesterday.
- Write a paragraph where you explain your understanding of notes I gave in class yeaterday.

Within these strategies, there are several approaches that you can use as you find necessary.

1. Summary Writing Assignments - A common summary assignment is to have students summarize a lecture, a film, an interview, a video-taped lecture, an article, a page or a chapter. Summary writing is a valuable skill since it asks students to boil a particular text down to its essentials...the main idea (purpose) and supports. In other words, students search the same components in this piece of writing that they should include in their own writing.

2. Definition Writing Assignments - Students are frequently asked to define terms, equipment processes etc. In vocational-technical areas, the correct meaning becomes crucial to the total process and students should be competent in dealing with straight dictionary-type explanations as well as able to integrate extended definitions into their writing.

3. Log/Journal Writing - Some students might react negatively to Journal writing because they have done journals before and "never get anything out of it."

   Probably keeping a journal for the sake of a journal is wasted time. Writing should be meaningful and lead to something. A 'learning log' might be a more appropriate label and the name suggests "learning". They can include learning activities such as those mentioned earlier, lab work, a running account of a current events topic, the changing daily status of a project, or simply a list of all questions concerning a project that comes to mind during a week.

4. Assignments for Vocational Areas

- As students learn a process and become proficient at it, have them write these steps in a precise order. Ask that these log entries be titled, with subject headings and materials listed along with other pertinent information.
- Ask students to list the parts that make up a piece of equipment assembled - disassembled.
- Ask students to write letters to potential employers letting them know they are currently enrolled in a specific curriculum and will be graduating on a particular date and are interested in interviewing with their company.
- Acquaint students with the library and ask them to read and summarize in a couple of paragraphs the content of course-related articles. This familiarizes students not only with the library, but also with the periodicals available in their specific skill area.
- Ask students to write short commentaries or evaluations about their learning. English teachers probably get as close to students as anyone through student writing. This writing creates a bond often times that is special. By having students write more, you can get closer to your students too.
- In disciplines where students will be required to write-up job reports, have them do this frequently but insist on neatness and accuracy.
- Ask students to write requests:
  - . Requests to companies asking for product information.
  - . Requests to organizations regarding their services.
  - . Requests for an explanation/clarification.
- Finally, keep a list of writing assignments that have worked for you and share it with others. It is impossible to prescribe

an antidote for all writing problems but by working together we can diminish the odds.

Some Do's associated with WAC programs.

- Provide a variety of assignments.
- Make specific comments regarding content and form.
- When students need help with writing, provide the necessary resources - instructor - writing tutors.
- Have students read each other's work - share your work with them too.
- Share your experiences as a writer; things that work - strategies which haven't been as successful.
- Give students examples of the type of writing called for in a specific assignment.
- Make sure assignments are limited enough in scope to be dealt with.
- Have students write often and informally.
- Reinforce with your students the importance of good writing skills.
- Give clear and detailed instructions in all assignments.

Some Don'ts

- Don't tell students that they are involved in a special writing program.
- Don't assign busy work.
- Read every word that is ever written.
- Assign vague open-ended questions.
- Assume that students know what you are looking for and the exact format you want.
- Be turned off by negativism with the students. Very few enjoy writing so don't expect them to load you with compliments.

. Keep putting the writing off. Start as soon as possible.

. Worry if you don't recognize all writing errors. This is not your area of expertise but you can tell good writing in your subject area when you see it.

. Rewrite student papers.

. Return papers without some comment, usually something positive as well as an area for improvement.

. Get discouraged.